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Joint NGO Submission for the Initial Universal Periodic Review of Burkina Faso in December 2008

**By HelpAge International, Promo Femmes Développement Solidarité and
Association le TOCSIN**

Summary

Key words: gender based violence; rights of older people

This joint submission highlights the violence and abuse experienced by older women in Burkina Faso as a result of witchcraft accusations. It examines the underlying causes for the accusations and existing barriers to protection and realisation of older women's rights. It suggests a question to be asked of the Government of Burkina Faso during its initial UPR and finally makes a recommendation for Government action.

Violation of older women's rights in Burkina Faso

A genuine belief in witchcraft is widespread in Burkina Faso and older women are often the subject of accusations. Accused women are subjected to psychological trauma, physical harm, social exclusion, impoverishment through loss of property and assets, and ultimately banishment from their communities. Research conducted in 2006 by HelpAge International (HAI) and the Ministry of Social Action and National Solidarity (MASSN)¹ in seven provinces showed that about 90% of banished women commit suicide, flee to neighbouring communities where they are unknown or die of starvation as they are unable to reach a town or a reception centre (similar to a refuge centre).

Scale of abuse

Very little quantitative data exists on the number of witchcraft accusations made and their impact. The 2006 research by HAI and MASSN showed that 89.9% of residents of 11 reception centres had suffered rejection and banishment from their community as a result of witchcraft accusations. The majority of the victims were women (90%), illiterate (97.2%), belonging to the Mossi tribe (82%) and over 50 years of age (75%). In addition, 69.9% were married in polygamous homes as first wives. 58% of those in the refuge centres lived on less than one dollar (425 francs CFA) per month.

Underlying causes of accusations

1. Gender inequality and social exclusion exacerbates older women's vulnerability to rights abuse: older, disabled, poorer women, widows and those unprotected by male relatives are vulnerable, frequently stigmatised and subjected to witchcraft accusations.

¹ HelpAge International & the Ministry of Social Action and National Solidarity, *Etude Exclusion Sociale des Personnes Agees au Burkina Faso*, 2006

2. Awareness of older people's rights and relevant entitlements is poor both within the community in general and among older women, mainly due to high female illiteracy rates (only 15.2% of women in Passoré are literate). Older women are often reluctant to seek protection or report violations for fear of social sanction against their families.

3. The research showed that child morbidity and mortality are key underlying factors for witchcraft accusations. Limited access to health provision leads a large proportion of the population to depend on traditional healers who not only misdiagnose illnesses but also accuse and perpetuate the stigmatisation of vulnerable women.

4. About 80% of witchcraft accusations are instigated by relatives, due to the low value placed on older women in Mossi society and within polygamous families. Husbands, fellow-wives and in-laws often use witchcraft as a pretext to banish women no longer considered economically or biologically productive to the household. As a result, 95% of victims attribute their accusation to ulterior motives.

Barriers to protection of rights

Lack of awareness and protection perpetuates persecution and abuse of women's rights. Accused women have no support, access to legal advice or redress and therefore no option but to leave the community. Customary laws perpetuating inequality and human rights violations and the absence of clear legal and policy frameworks lead to the State's inability to enforce legislation such as the family and penal codes. Structural obstacles limit the capacity and mandate of the authorities to address the issue and duty bearers such as the gendarmerie, prefects, judges and civil servants often lack knowledge and resources to provide protection and are unwilling to engage in 'domestic' issues. Furthermore, civil society organisations lack the capacity to challenge traditional practices, customary laws and state inertia.

There is a lack of reliable data on the scale of witchcraft-related rights abuse. Institutional and cultural barriers hinder the systematic collection of data relating to witchcraft accusations and rights violations. In addition older people are excluded from local public service delivery and national policy-making processes. Public authorities at all levels have failed to address the victimisation of older women. Government policy instruments, such as the PRSP, fail to make specific commitments to meeting the needs of older people.

Finally, civil society's capacity to defend older people's rights and advocate for policy development and implementation is weak. While a range of civil society organisations have emerged in response to widespread chronic poverty and rights violations, they frequently lack the capacity to challenge deep-rooted traditional practices, customary laws and state inertia.

Question for Government of Burkina Faso

What is the Government of Burkina Faso doing to ensure that there are clear legal and policy frameworks in place that prohibit accusations of witchcraft and provide means of redress and protection for those that are accused?

Recommendation 1 to Government of Burkina Faso

We recommend that the Government of Burkina Faso review existing legislation and policies to ensure that they include the prohibition of accusations of witchcraft and provision for redress and protection of those who are accused.

Recommendation 2 to Government of Burkina Faso

We urge the Burkina Faso Government to issue a policy statement that commits Provincial Advisory Committees to include measures in District plans (Monographie de la Province) that challenge the intimidation, isolation, abuse and killings of older women due to allegations of witchcraft.

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